



GRANT ATKINSON (4)



dogged CAT

It's tough to survive when you're still learning how to fend for yourself, as a determined young leopard demonstrated to wildlife photographer and safari guide **Grant Atkinson**.

ABOVE AND RIGHT From a safe height, the young female leopard hissed and snarled at the African wild dogs below.

OPPOSITE, ABOVE With a scrambling leap the cat launched herself up the tree, the remains of the impala in her jaws.

OPPOSITE, BELOW At one point the leopard was holding onto her booty by a single claw.



THERE'S NO LOVE LOST BETWEEN AFRICAN WILD DOGS and leopards. The two species are fierce competitors: leopards, typically solitary, sometimes prey on young dogs, while a pack of dogs will not hesitate to attack a lone leopard. Things can go very badly for the cat if it's caught in the open by a wild dog pack.

At Chitabe in Botswana's Okavango Delta I witnessed an interaction between a recently independent female leopard and a 20-strong pack of wild dogs. While feeding on an impala they had killed, the dogs became aware of the approaching leopard and charged her, following her to the base of the small, shaky-looking dead tree in which she'd taken refuge. Some lay down to wait, trapping her in the tree, but after a while the call of the carcass became too strong and they rejoined their pack-mates on the kill.

The leopard, clearly hungry, was intent on the impala too and returned to the ground – only to be pursued again by the dogs. She bounded to the next dead tree and clawed her way to safety, then turned on her attackers, even making short warning charges down the trunk. The dogs quickly lost interest and, having by now finished their meal, they settled in the nearest shade.

This was the leopard's chance. Slowly she descended, one eye on the dogs. Keeping low to the ground, she crept to what was left of the carcass, grabbed it and rushed back to her refuge. But the carcass was held together only by skin and unravelled as she climbed. Gripping the trunk with her hind paws, she opened her jaws and caught the impala in her front paws as it fell.

Even then, the carcass gradually slipped from her grasp and finally thumped to earth. In a split second the cat had raced down the tree, got a better grip on the remains and returned to her perch – and there she spent the rest of the day, gnawing at what little the dogs had left. It is always fascinating to see how extreme hunger drives animals into high-risk situations.

